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ABSTRACT

One technique for helping children adjust to changing role models is bibliotherapy--the use of children's books to facilitate identification with and exploration of sex role behavior. Confronted with change in various social systems, particularly the family, children are faced with conflicts concerning their sex role development. The process through which children learn to identify with a particular sex role is explained by learning, psychoanalytic, and cognitive-developmental theories. A brief outline of the bibliotherapeutic process and techniques for implementing bibliotherapy are discussed. A selected list of current preschooler's literature dealing with sex role development is presented. (DST)

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USING BIBLIOTHERAPY TO HELP CHILDREN ADJUST TO CHANGING ROLE MODELS

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Abstract

With more mothers working outside the home, the changing role of fathers, and the division of labor shifting within the family system, children today are faced with conflicts concerning their sex-role development. One helpful technique to assist children in adjusting to changing role models is bibliotherapy--the use of children's books to facilitate identification with and exploration of sex-role behavior. A brief outline of the bibliotherapeutic process, techniques for implementing bibliotherapy, and examples of current children's literature dealing with sex-role development will all be discussed.

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Children learn appropriate sex-role development through the socialization process. The key social system involved in this learning process is the family. Other systems such as the school, neighborhood, and community also have an important impact on a child's sex-role development. Since all of these systems are experiencing social change, particularly the family system, children today are faced with conflicts concerning their sex-role development.[1]

The process through which children learn to identify with a particular sex role has been explained with three major theories--learning theory, psychoanalytic theory, and cognitive-developmental theory. The process of identification plays a role in all three theories; however, the processes leading to identification and its importance in each of the theories vary.[2]

Bandura, a learning theorist, has emphasized the obvious reasons why a child learns to identify with a particular sex role--1) immediately after birth, a name indicative of sex is often given to a child, 2) the child is many times encouraged to dress in sex-typed clothing and given sex-typed toys to play with, and 3) role appropriate behaviors from the child are usually reinforced by the parents. The major emphasis of learning theory, then, is that sex-role training starts at birth when appropriate sexual responses are rewarded and sex-inappropriate behaviors are punished.[4] Through this process, the child gradually begins to identify with the appropriate gender role.

Psychoanalytic theorists assume that the parent plays the key role

in the child's identification with appropriate sex roles.[5] The process is a complex intrapsychic one that links sexual identification to the resolution of the Oedipus complex for boys and the Electra complex for girls. According to the Oedipus complex, the boy fears that his father will castrate him in retaliation for the child's loving feelings for his mother. Since the child realizes he cannot win in the struggle for his mother, he resolves the Oedipus complex by identifying with his father. Although somewhat more involved, the Electra complex is similar to the Oedipal complex in that the female child feels a strong sexual attraction to the parent of the opposite sex.[6] Because such desires are clearly inappropriate and would in fact be punished, they result in anxiety. The girl is able to suppress these inappropriate desires and to reduce anxiety through identification with the mother. It must be kept in mind that the psychoanalytic theory of identification as an explanation for sex-role development has been greatly condensed here.

The third theory, the cognitive-developmental theory, maintains that love and affection for the parents bring about sexual identification, not a resolution of a complex intrapsychic process as described by psychoanalysts.[7] It is a child's conception of his or her body and how it differs from other bodies that determines sexual behavior. This process begins when children are initially labeled "boy" or "girl." The label of "boy" or "girl" becomes the central organizer and determinant of many of the child's activities, values, and attitudes. Once children have stabilized themselves as to gender, they value positively those objects consistent with this gender and act in accordance with this identity, since there is a need for cognitive consistency.

According to cognitive developmental theory, a child's stereotypes

of masculine and feminine behavior are not derived by reinforcement or identification, but from universal, perceived sex differences in bodily structure and capacities. A child's gender identity becomes stabilized at about five or six years of age.[8] The child's growing understanding of cultural sex roles and cognitive development are major factors in determining the child's sexual behavior.

None of the three theories related to sex-role development adequately explains how a child develops a sexual identity.[9] Learning, identification, and cognitive development all probably contribute to the overall socialization process impacting a child's sex-role identity. One would be safe in concluding that the first components of a sex role are learned through reinforcement and imitation and that identification and cognitive growth become more important as the child matures. Regardless of the fact that we do not have a complete understanding of how children develop their sexual identity, all three theories suggest that parents and the family system are key agents impacting sex-role development. Since the family system is changing as indicated by new roles of parents and the shifting division of labor in the familial structure, many children are faced with conflicts concerning their sex role development. In this paper, the bibliotherapeutic technique is presented as one strategy that can help children adjust to changing role models. A major emphasis will be on how children's literature can facilitate a child's identification with and exploration of sex-role behavior.

Androgyny, Changing Gender Roles, and Literature

The changing occupational structure of American society plus the evolving roles of males and females have led to consideration of a

theoretical and practical concept called "androgyny." This word comes from two Greek words--andros (male) and gyne (female)-- and is often defined as "being sex-role flexible."[10]

The concept of androgyny has emerged as an alternative to traditional sex roles because of the belief that masculinity and femininity are opposites is being refuted by many social scientists. A number of studies have been conducted supporting this notion.[11] These studies generally conclude that sex roles should not be viewed as bipolar sexual extremes, but rather as dualistic dimensions within each other.

What are the implications of an androgynous sex-role orientation for child development? Given the fact that there is more blending of the sex roles between men and women in today's society and that this is particularly true in a large number of families, an androgynous sex-role orientation may contribute to a child's development.[12]

Research by Babladelis appears to support this view.[13] Babladelis found that the classification of a child as androgynous suggested that the child had attributes of masculine and feminine characteristics highly valued by society. Also, the androgynous child was achievement oriented, showed high self-esteem, and was found to be a warm and caring individual.

Within the past decade, children's literature has also evolved in a direction that more realistically reflects the changing sex roles of males and females. In the early 1970s, Alroy et al., in a study entitled Dick and Jane as Victims, did a content analysis of over 100 pieces of children's literature. In this literature, Alroy et al. found that 1) girls and women were generally characterized as being passive, 2) they were more involved with emotions than with things, 3) they were more involved in activities related to taking care of children than were boys and men,

and 4) very few worked outside of the home; if they did, they were teachers, librarians, or nurses.[14]

Another study conducted in 1972 by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross examined prize-winning children's literature and found that females were greatly underrepresented in titles, central roles, and illustrations. Those few female characters who did appear in central roles of a book were mostly inconspicuous, passive and immobile, and were most often found indoors. Weitzman et al. concluded that the majority of the children's books they surveyed reinforced traditional sex-role stereotypes.[15] Their results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

A COMPARISON OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS
APPEARING IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's Picture Books	Weitzman, Eifler Hokada, Ross (1972)	Collins, Ingoldsby, Dellman (1982)
males in titles	89%	67%
females in titles	11%	33%
males in central roles	78%	63%
females in central roles	22%	37%
males in pictures	88%	58%
females in pictures	12%	42%

Convinced that the increase of female involvement in the labor force during the last decade would be reflected by greater sexual equality in children's literature as well, Collins, Ingoldsby, and Dellman recently conducted a follow-up assessment of the 1972 Weitzman study. As shown in Table 1, the 1982 follow-up study of Collins et al. did find a substantial increase of female representation in recent children's literature. In surveying children's books during the last decade, Collins et al. also

found that females in central roles were generally active, adventurous, nontraditional, and more often found outdoors.[16]

This trend toward less male and female stereotyping in children's books as reported by Collins et al. is encouraging and will hopefully continue. The use of androgynous characters in children's literature is another positive move toward eliminating the concept that sex roles are bipolar. Characters with names that are not sex specific and with facial features and hair styles that are neither masculine nor feminine are beginning to appear in a few recent children's books. By blending male and female roles, androgynous characters in children's books would seem to enhance the sex-role development of children and help them to be more attuned to changing gender roles.

Using Bibliotherapy to Facilitate Sex-Role Development

With the positive changes in children's literature during the last decade--more female representation in children's books as well as a beginning emphasis on androgynous characters--bibliotherapy would appear to have value for children faced with conflicts concerning their sex-role development. Bibliotherapy, most simply defined, means helping with books. Lindeman and Kling suggest that one of the important uses of bibliotherapy is to help children meet developmental needs through the use of literature.[17]

As mentioned previously, the three major theories explaining how children develop sex roles (learning theory, psychoanalytic theory, and cognitive-developmental theory) all stress identification to some degree. Although by no means the only source of influence, children's books provide a vehicle for identification and imitation.[18] The characters in

books, which can serve as symbolic role models, can have an effect on children's acquisition of sex-role behaviors.[19]

Although sex-role development is a continuous process throughout childhood and adolescence, it appears that children begin to develop a sex-role identity as early as the pre-school years. Kuhn found that by the age of 2 years children have knowledge of sex-role stereotypes and that this knowledge of sex-role attributes is positively correlated with the children's comprehension of gender identity.[20] According to Sutter, Seegmiller, and Dunivant, children's sex-role development is evident at age three.[21] Papalia and Olds even support the contention that sex-role patterns developed during the pre-school years remain remarkably stable throughout adulthood.[22]

Therefore, bibliotherapy as a means of helping children adjust to changing role models would seem to have particular usefulness for those working with pre-school children. Flerx, Fidler, and Rogers found that the attitudes of pre-school children who heard stories with nontraditional role models were less stereotyped than the attitudes of pre-school children who heard traditional stories.[23] After hearing stories about child characters who reflect changing gender roles, the pre-school child can identify with these characters and begin to explore his/her own sex-role development. Hearing children's books about nonstereotyped adult characters can aid the pre-school child in imitating positive sex-role models.

A selected group of children's books for pre-schoolers follows. The major characters in these books exhibit sex-role flexible behavior and would therefore serve as an aid in helping children develop an appropriate sex-role identity. Those books marked with an asterisk have a child character who is androgynous--the sex of the child cannot be determined through either text or illustrations in the book.

Bauer, Caroline. My Mom Travels a Lot. New York: Frederick Warne, 1981. Due to the fact that her mother's job requires frequent traveling, a young girl and her father develop a close relationship and share household responsibilities.

Kempler, Susan, Doreen Rappaport, and Michele Spirn. A Man Can Be··· New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981. While spending the day together, a young boy sees his father involved with household chores and notices his father expressing a variety of emotions.

Mitchell, Joyce. My Mommy Makes Money. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1984. Various children take pride in their mothers' non-traditional occupations which include carpenter, appliance repairer, surgeon, minister, etc.

*Moncure, Jane Belk. NOW I AM TWO! Chicago: Children's Press, 1984. A two-year old proudly describes physical skills as well as cognitive accomplishments.

*Oxenbury, Helen. Mother's Helper. New York: Dial Press, 1982. A toddler is shown helping mother with household chores and learning to play independently.

Pearson, Susan. Everybody Knows That! New York: Dial Press, 1978. Although their peers try to convince them differently, best friends Patty and Herbie enjoy playing together with trucks and trains as well as with dolls.

Pomerantz, Charlotte. Posy. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1983. A good father-daughter relationship is evident as Posy's father helps his child prepare for bed and reminiscences about quality time they have shared.

Schwartz, Amy. Bea and Mr. Jones. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury Press, 1982. Each bored with their daily activities, kindergartener Bea and her executive father agree to switch roles for one day.

Stecher, Miriam and Alice Kandell. Daddy and Ben Together. New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1981. Although it is difficult adjusting to his mother's job which requires traveling, Ben shares household chores with his father and decides they need to spend time together having fun as well.

*Tester, Sylvia Root. Frustrated. Jealous. Sad. (What does it mean? series). Chicago: Children's Press, 1980. In each book, a child explores feelings and shares problems with a caring adult.

Van Woerkom, Dorothy. Something to Crow About. Chicago: Albert Whitman and Company, 1982. Ralph the rooster embarks on single parenthood when he decides to hatch a basketful of orphaned eggs.

Vigna, Judith. Daddy's New Baby. Chicago: Albert Whitman and Company, 1982. During a weekend spent with her father and stepmother, a young girl is initially jealous of their new baby but later helps her father care for the baby.

Wandro, Mark and Joani Blank. My Daddy is a Nurse. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1981. Although daddies with traditional occupations are mentioned, the focus is on fathers who are flight attendants, pre-school teachers, librarians, ballet dancers, homemakers, etc.

*Watson, Wendy. Jamie's Story. New York: Philomel, 1981. Father and mother share the cooking and child care responsibilities, with their toddler gladly assisting.

Weiss, Nicki. Hank and Oogie. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1982. With no pressure from his very understanding parents, Hank decides he has outgrown his companion of many years, a stuffed hippopotamus named Oogie.

Zolotow, Charlotte. William's Doll. New York: Harper and Row, 1972. Although his father insists on giving William masculine toys, a sensitive grandmother realizes the young boy's need for a doll and gives him one to care for.

These are but a few of the recent children's books which could be used with a pre-school child for facilitating sex-role development. When making use of bibliotherapy to help pre-school children adjust to changing role models, the helping person should observe the following guidelines:

1) bibliotherapy should be used with pre-school children who enjoy being read to.

2) bibliotherapy should be used as an adjunct to other means of exploring sex-role development.

3) any book selected should reflect an appreciation for individual differences.[24]

4) in addition to characters which are sex-role flexible, the book should contain sex-neutral generic terms such as salesperson or mailperson whenever possible.

5) the length of text and use of illustrations in the book should match the pre-school child's attention span.

6) the reading of the book should be followed by activities such as guided discussion, making mobiles and collages, using puppets for role-playing, etc.[25]

Although the previous discussion focuses on books for pre-school children, bibliotherapy can be used for young people at all developmental levels as an aid to identifying with positive sex-role models. This identification process appears to be a vital part of children's sex-role development,

according to three major theories--learning theory, psychoanalytic theory, and cognitive-developmental theory. The emergence of recent children's literature which supports an androgynous, or sex-role flexible, viewpoint would seem to be a valuable tool for facilitating the sex-role development of children.

Conclusion

One of the important uses of bibliotherapy is to help children meet developmental needs through the use of literature. A large number of children's books suitable for use in the bibliotherapeutic process are now available that accurately reflect positive sex-role development.[26]

Even though sex-role development is important throughout childhood, it is particularly critical for the pre-school child to have positive sex-role models. Fortunately, many children's books have focused on the changing roles of males and females, including androgynous sex-role behaviors. Introducing the pre-school child to this kind of literature not only facilitates sex-role identity, but also helps the child explore his/her own sex-role development--both important learning experiences to help children cope with the changes now occurring within the family system.

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